# CHILE: THE QUESTION OF POWER

By Paul M. Sweezy

The Chilean tragedy confirms what should have been, and to many was, obvious all along, that there is no such thing as a peaceful road to socialism. Those who are irrevocably committed to nonviolence would do well to admit that they are not revolutionaries and to confine their activities to seeking reforms which are safely within the framework of the capitalist system. The reason is simply that the beneficiaries of the existing system, including many who only imagine themselves to be its beneficiaries, are not going either to give up without a struggle or to renounce any means available to them in waging the struggle.

But this does not mean, and the Chilean experience certainly does not prove, that in the fight for socialism only violent means are appropriate and effective. It means only that at some stage of the process violent confrontation is inevitable. It follows that the issue of violent confrontation must be central to all socialist strategy and tactics at *all* stages of the process. The problem is not how to avoid violent confrontation but how to prepare for it and win it. Looked at from this angle, the Chilean experience has many lessons to teach.

We must begin by recalling and emphasizing the profound truth which is the very core of Lenin's great work *The State and Revolution*: the bourgeois state exists for the purpose of

protecting the bourgeois social order. It follows that it cannot be used to transform the social order; it must be broken up and replaced by a state representing the interests of the exploited classes. Only *after* this has been accomplished does it make sense to talk about a transition to socialism.

The Chilean experience demonstrates that it is possible for a government with a long-run socialist goal to win office through the means provided by a bourgeois democratic constitution. Where this is possible, the socialist forces have no choice but to use these means to the best of their ability: to refuse to do so would mean abandoning the political arena to the bourgeois parties. What went wrong in Chile therefore occurred after and not before Allende's election in 1970. And, as the foregoing remarks unavoidably imply, the heart of the matter was the failure of the Unidad Popular (UP) government to foresee and do everything in its power to prepare for the armed confrontation which finally and fatally came on September 11, 1973.

What could the UP government have done?

To answer this question we must recall the early history of the new regime which assumed office in November 1970. The first reaction of the Chilean bourgeoisie to Allende's election was one of panic. The stock market collapsed, capital (and some capitalists) fled the country, production slowed down, and unemployment rose. At the same time the extreme Right attempted to foment a coup, an effort which at that particular moment the leaders of the armed forces regarded as inopportune and potentially disastrous. The failure of the coup attempts strengthened Allende's hand politically, and by the end of the year new economic policies designed to benefit the popular masses (freezing prices and raising wages, expanding housing and public works programs, accelerating agrarian reform) began to show results. The popularity and political base of the government increased rapidly in the early months of 1971, a fact proved by the municipal elections of April which were fought out by all parties not on local issues but in terms of support for or opposition to the UP government. Whereas Allende had polled 36.3 percent of the vote in the presidential election, the share of the UP parties increased to 50.9 percent in April. The UP, in other words, gained an absolute majority and in-

creased its proportion of the total vote by no less than 40 percent during its first six months in office. This was a stunning achievement which may well be unique in the history of electoral politics. It opened up new perspectives and new possibilities. The real tragedy of Chile is that this truth, so obvious in retrospect, was not grasped and imaginatively acted upon by the political leadership at the time.

Allende's election gave the UP control over one branch of the government, the executive. The other branches—the legislature, the judiciary, and the armed forces—remained in the hands of the enemies of the UP. To achieve state power, the UP had to capture these strongholds of the enemy: failure to do so would ensure that sooner or later they would be used as bases from which to counterattack and oust the UP from the executive branch.

The situation which existed after the April elections was extremely favorable for the UP. Two things must be borne in mind in this connection. First, the Chilean constitution had been amended under the previous Christian Democratic government to provide for plebiscites as a method of breaking deadlocks between the president and the congress. And second, the UP electoral program had called for the replacement of the two-house (Chamber of Deputies and Senate) legislature by a unicameral Popular Assembly. It would have been perfectly possible, and wholly within the norms of constitutional procedure which Allende had pledged to respect, for the government to interpret the April municipal elections as a mandate to move forward with the implementation of its program. The procedure and hoped-for results would have been approximately as follows (failure was of course also a possibility, a subject to which we return presently). A draft law abolishing the two-house legislature and substituting the proposed Popular Assembly could have been submitted to the congress. It would of course have been rejected, thus paving the way for a plebiscite. If the UP had then waged an aggressive campaign, educating the voters on the underlying issues and raising their political consciousness, it is reasonable to assume that the April majority could have been held and perhaps even increased. The next step would have been to win a majority of seats in the new Popular As-

sembly. With this accomplished, not only could vitally important legislation which had been blocked by the old congress be enacted; equally significant, the judiciary could have been reformed and re-staffed (another plank in the UP's electoral platform).

This would have left the armed forces as the only branch of government not under UP control and the last obstacle to the capture of real state power. The most appropriate ways of waging this ultimate struggle are not so obvious as those sketched above. But one thing is clear: the UP administration should have entered the struggle immediately, while its prestige was at a peak and the political initiative entirely in its hands. Reactionary officers should have been retired, loyal ones promoted to key command positions; the pay, living conditions, and democratic rights of enlisted men and noncommissioned officers should have been expanded and improved; political education should have been introduced into training programs; and, perhaps most important, all contacts between the Chilean military and the United States should have been unconditionally severed. At the same time, the UP administration should have started organizing, arming, and training a popular militia with the purpose of entrusting to it more and more of the responsibilities hitherto borne by the army and the national police (*carabineros*). All of these measures, taken together, would lead more or less rapidly to the replacement of the old bourgeois military establishment by a new one under the control of the socialist forces. When this had been achieved, the process of transforming Chilean society from capitalism to socialism could begin in earnest.

The big question which must be answered is why the UP government failed to embark on the course indicated in either the political or the military arena. Part of the answer of course might be that important segments of the UP leadership did not really want to complete the conquest of state power and begin the transition to socialism, any more than, say, the British Labor Party or the Scandinavian Social Democrats want to pursue such goals. There is undoubtedly some truth in this, but it is not the aspect of the matter which concerns us here. There were also in the leadership of the UP sincere socialists who

recognized the need to establish control over the legislature and the judiciary and at least to neutralize the armed forces, and who yet did not favor, let alone openly advocate, bold action along the lines indicated. Such people might have made up the entire UP leadership without the government's policies having been any different than they actually were. It is their estimate of the situation and their reasoning which socialists everywhere must understand and learn to deal with if future tragedies like Chile are to be avoided.*

First, let us look at the UP's military policy, which was essentially the opposite of that suggested above. The generals and admirals were handled with kid gloves, and efforts were made to give them increased economic and political responsibilities. When the MIR (Movement of the Revolutionary Left) tried to do political work among the rank-and-file soldiers, the government cracked down hard: Allende's own nephew was sent to jail for such activity. U.S. aid to the military was allowed to continue at a time when Washington was choking off all credits both by American banks and by international lending agencies to the government itself. In the final months before the coup of September 11, 1973, the Allende administration allowed the congress to pass without veto an act giving the armed forces the right to search anywhere for arms, resulting in a veritable reign of terror against workers in their factories and homes. The military policy of the UP, in short, was not only to tolerate but to flatter and strengthen an enemy and fifth column of imperialism in its midst.

Why? The answer, I think, is a mixture of political naiveté and fear. Some of the UP leaders, probably including Allende himself, swallowed the myth of the non-political and non-interventionist character of the Chilean military. They knew about the numerous plots and conspiracies involving far-right officers, but they wanted to believe that the officer corps as a

* The following analysis is based less on published material than on what I learned or inferred from political discussions with many members of the Chilean Left, both in and out of the UP, on visits to that country in November 1970 and October 1971. Those involved in these discussions included persons close to President Allende and other policy-makers in the UP government and parties.

whole would remain aloof as long as the government respected constitutional norms. At the same time, and in contradiction to this myth, they feared that any attempt to reorganize the military or interfere with its monopoly of armed force and its autonomy in matters of discipline, training, etc., would provoke an immediate coup against which the government would be powerless to defend itself.

There is no need now to debunk the myth. That was effectively accomplished on September 11th, and one can hope that the lesson has been learned once and for all, not only by Chileans but by socialists the world over. The fear is another matter. That it was not ungrounded goes without saying. But what the UP leadership should have known was that if they were serious about a Chilean road to socialism they would have sooner or later to confront head-on the problem of the military. The right question to ask in the early months of 1971 was whether this was the most favorable time for the confrontation. From the point of view of socialist strategy, in other words, the problem was essentially one of timing. But this was true with respect not only to the confrontation with the military, but also to the whole question of restructuring and gaining control of the legislative and judicial branches of the government. We know that the UP leadership did not move on any of these fronts, and it is crucially important to understand why.

The basic reason, I believe, was a failure to evaluate correctly what happened in the period between the presidential election of September and the municipal elections of April. As already pointed out above, the initial panic and ensuing condition of economic semi-paralysis was followed by a recovery characterized by an upsurge of mass buying power and a sharp drop in unemployment. There was undoubtedly a direct causal connection between this recovery with its improvement in the living conditions of the lower classes on the one hand and the spectacular gains of the UP in the municipal elections on the other. The mistake lay in misinterpreting and overestimating these successes, in assuming that they marked the beginning of a new and lasting phase of continuing gains for the mass of the people. If this had in fact been true, the conclusion would logically have followed that there was no need to make difficult and un-

deniably risky political decisions in the aftermath of the April elections. On the contrary, a convincing argument could be advanced that to embark on such a course at that time would be a serious mistake: much better to allow the favorable trends to continue unfolding. If the UP won a bare majority in April, it could be confidently expected that this would increase to 55 or 60 percent in another six months. Then would be the time to strike; in the meantime, all energies should be concentrated on improving the performance of the UP government, especially of its economic agencies and programs. For the time being the battle of production was decisive; the unsettled political issues could safely be postponed until they were really ripe for solution.

With hindsight it is easy to see that this was a tragic illusion. The hoped-for improvements failed to materialize; the political base of the UP did not continue to expand; the Chilean bourgeoisie rallied from its early shock and confusion and began to fight back in an increasingly organized way; international finance capital, led by the United States, clamped a credit embargo on Chile, making the importation of sorely needed food, raw materials, and capital equipment increasingly difficult. The chances of winning a plebiscite seemed to recede, the dangers of confronting the military to grow. The golden opportunity presented by the April elections faded away, never to return. By the end of 1971 the UP had lost the initiative and for all practical purposes had abandoned any attempt to devise a coherent strategy for taking power. At the governmental level a period of drift set in, of living from day to day, hoping for some unexpected favorable turn of events. The real struggle passed increasingly into the streets, factories, and other places of work, with both the working class and the bourgeoisie moving increasingly toward direct action which could end only in the victory in armed struggle of one or the other. And the fact that this was occurring with the armed forces still firmly in enemy hands gravely, and in the event fatally, compromised the chances of a working-class victory.

I said a moment ago that with hindsight all this is easy to see. But I do not wish to imply that it was impossible to see the broad outlines, if not the details, of the developing situation in

the crucial months of 1971. The key was a correct analysis of the economics of the period following the new government's assumption of office. It is characteristic of capitalist economies, particularly underdeveloped ones, that they have relatively large amounts of unused resources—idle plant capacity, unemployed workers, and inventories of raw materials and semi-finished products. Chile in 1970 was no exception. Moreover, Chile had large foreign exchange reserves as a result of several years of Vietnam-war-related strong demand and high prices for copper, Chile's main export commodity. There were, therefore, no obstacles or bottlenecks in the way of a rapid increase of output, particularly in the technologically unsophisticated industries producing goods for mass consumption (textiles, clothing, household furnishings, etc.) and this was precisely what happened when the government adopted fiscal, wage, and price policies designed to expand mass purchasing power.* By increasing their operating rates, the capitalists in the industries principally concerned were able to increase their profits despite wage increases and price freezes. But the fact that they were willing to do so in no way indicates any inclination to make capital investments which could only pay off in the more or less distant future. In a climate of extreme uncertainty, capitalists are eager to grab what they can today but are opposed to making any commitments for tomorrow. And in their long-run activity they are sure to be guided by what they consider to be in the interest of

* Leo Huberman and I reported on a similar phenomenon in Cuba at a comparable stage of the Cuban Revolution. We were, we wrote in the spring of 1960, struck again and again during our stay in Cuba by "the extent to which rapid and important results could be obtained merely by eliminating the worst abuses and wastes of the old order. To put the point in different terms, there was a very large unused (or abused) potential in the Cuban economy and society, and this circumstance has enabled the new regime to accomplish quickly and relatively easily certain things which in less favorable conditions might have taken years." And we cited a Department of Commerce study which said that "few countries carry a heavier overhead of underutilized productive facilities." Chile was in much the same situation in 1970-1971, a fact which was of course well known to the UP's economists. The quotations are from Huberman and Sweezy, *Cuba: Anatomy of a Revolution,* 2nd edition (Monthly Review Press, 1961), p. 95.

the survival of the system and the defeat of its enemies. It follows that the economic upswing of early 1971 had to be seen as a strictly short-run, transitory phenomenon.* This is all the more so since its continuation was heavily dependent on the availability of strategic imports at a time when copper prices were falling and the international bankers and lending agencies were refusing further loans to Chile. The comfortable foreign exchange reserves of the pre-Allende period began to dwindle on the morrow of the UP victory at the polls and were obviously headed for exhaustion in the relatively near future.

It seems clear to me that a real revolutionary leadership would have grasped this situation and drawn the logical conclusion that the electoral victory in April presented the UP not only with the opportunity but with the inescapable necessity to take bold and decisive measures to wrest complete control of the state apparatus from the bourgeoisie. But whether or not I am right about this does not matter now: the point is that this is the cardinal lesson to be learned from the Chilean experience. Gaining full state power *must* be the overriding objective of a serious socialist movement which achieves office through electoral

* The underlying reasons for this were clearly spelled out many years ago by the great Polish economist Oskar Lange: "An economic system based on private enterprise and private property of the means of production can work only as long as the security of private property and of income derived from property and from enterprise is maintained. The very existence of a government bent on introducing socialism is a constant threat to this security. Therefore, the capitalist economy cannot function under a socialist government unless the government is socialist in name only. If the socialist government socializes the coal mines today and declares that the textile industry is going to be socialized after five years, we can be quite certain that the textile industry will be ruined before it will be socialized. For the owners threatened with expropriation have no inducement to make the necessary investments and to manage them efficiently. And no government supervision or administrative measures can cope effectively with the passive resistance and sabotage of the owners and managers." Lange drew the logical conclusion that "there exists only one economic policy which he [an economist called upon to advise a socialist government] can commend . . . as likely to lead to success. This is a policy of *revolutionary courage.*" It was a policy sadly lacking in the Chilean UP. The quotations are from a section of Lange's well-known 1938 essay "On the Economic Theory of Socialism," which is reproduced under the title "On the Policy of Transition" in MONTHLY REVIEW (January 1971), pp. 39-40, 44.

means.* Depending on the particular historical conjuncture, it may be possible to bring about conditions which temporarily tilt the balance in favor of the revolution and against the existing order. If such a situation does arise, it is absolutely crucial that it be seized and exploited to the full. The alternative is to hand over the initiative to the enemy with an implied invitation to use its superior economic power to create chaos and its military power, in the ripeness of time, to deliver the *coup de grâce.* This, as we now know, is exactly what happened in Chile.

There was of course no guarantee that an all-out political offensive following the April elections would have succeeded—in politics, especially revolutionary politics, there is no such thing as guarantees—and it was indeed this uncertainty more than anything else that caused the UP leadership to hesitate, postpone, and finally do nothing. A plebiscite might have been lost. Or, even if it had been won, the subsequent elections might not have produced a majority in the new Popular Assembly. What then?

The worst that could have happened, it would seem, was what actually did happen. But a revolutionary leadership would have had other courses open to it. It could have set about at once, as the left Socialists and the MIR advocated, to prepare for the showdown with the military. If the result had been to provoke a coup in 1971, the chances of defeating it would probably have been better than in 1973, especially since it would have been in answer to deliberate defensive preparations. Or a political retreat might have been undertaken. This would have involved a compromise with the left wing of the Christian Democrats, and its purpose would have been to maintain the con-

* I should like to emphasize a point which is implied rather than spelled out in the foregoing analysis, namely, that the conquest of full state power is essential not only to thwart a politico-military counter-revolution but also to make possible *continuing* advance on the economic front. For this, extensive state-financed investment, massive mobilization of human resources, coordinated central planning, and firm controls over remaining enterprises are indispensable. But the achievement of these goals and activities is obviously impossible unless and until the conquest of state power by the socialist forces has been completed and consolidated. In addition to illusions about bourgeois democracy, the UP government in Chile also had illusions about what could be accomplished within the framework of a capitalist economy.

stitutional regime and keep the road open for a renewed advance later on. This course, to be sure, would have been a difficult one, raising all the toughest questions of political flexibility and united front tactics. But those who wish to learn from the Chilean experience should certainly not rule out in advance the possibility that a situation might have arisen in which a policy of retreat and compromise was called for. As always in revolutionary politics, this is a question which can only be answered on the basis not of abstract principle but of a careful and thoroughly realistic analysis of concrete situations.

This is an appropriate note to close on. Perhaps the greatest, and ultimately fatal, weakness of the Chilean UP was that it had no coherent strategy to begin with, and at no time showed itself capable of making the kind of assessment of the situations in which it was operating which would have been essential to success. If the heroic sacrifices of the Chilean workers are not to have been in vain, revolutionary socialists the world over must take this lesson to heart and solemnly resolve to master the art of analyzing reality and drawing correct conclusions from their analyses.

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He who carries out a revolution only half way is only digging his own grave.

—Saint-Just, 1794